

Introducing Historical Thinking to Second Language Learners: Exploring What Students Know and What They Want to Know

CINTHIA SALINAS
MARÍA E. FRÁNQUIZ
STEVE GUBERMAN

To explore the nature of historical thinking with her English language learners (ELLs), a bilingual student teacher presented historical and contemporary photographs related to the annual *Día de los Muertos* celebration held in Mexico and the United States and asked her students questions. Typically, people commemorate *Día de los Muertos*—an ancient observance of remembering those individuals who have died but left an imprint on the present—by marching in procession to cemeteries. Families sweep and decorate gravesites of loved ones with candles, food, and armloads of *cempasuchil* (marigolds). They also carefully place *ofrendas* (offerings) of pictures, flowers, incense, candles, and worldly items favored by the dearly departed on homemade altars. Children and adults eat sugar skulls or a special round bread called *pan de muertos*. The student teacher began by asking questions about two photos:

Teacher: What do you see in the photos?

Juan: *La fiesta de Día de los Muertos.*

CINTHIA SALINAS is a professor at the University of Texas, Austin. MARÍA E. FRÁNQUIZ is a professor at the University of Texas, San Antonio. STEVE GUBERMAN is a professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Teacher: Great, but how do you know this (pointing to a photo of a procession) is a celebration of *Día de los Muertos*?

Juan: *Veo la gente en el cementerio con flores y toda la comida.* (I see people in the cemetery with flowers and food.)

Teacher: Why is this celebration important?

Sandra: We go to the cemetery and decorate everything and just remember our *abuelos* (grandparents).

Teacher: Excellent, can you see any difference in the two photos?

Juan: (Pointing to a skeleton in one picture and a sugar skull in the other picture). *Tienen calaveras.* (They have skeletons, sugar skulls.)

Patti: Why are there skeletons (pointing to a skeleton wearing a heart, suit, and glasses) and sugar skulls?

Teacher: Great questions. Why do you think these pictures are different?

Sandra: Hmm. Because people write *calaveras* (poems) for *El Día de los Muertos* and they buy sugar skulls.

In the example above, the student teacher used a 1907 zinc etching by José Guadalupe Posada printed for the Feast of the Day of the Dead and a photograph of a procession to a cemetery in 2004. The teacher made the variability of human interactions across cultures and time apparent to the third-graders

through photographs, teacher- and student-directed questions, and prior understandings of *Día de los Muertos*. In lieu of a cumbersome reading assignment, abstract vocabulary in a social studies textbook, or teacher-centered talk, the students were able to view the photographs as representations of elaborate cultural and historical concepts and, consequently, to engage in a rich classroom discussion using historical thinking. These student and teacher interactions remind us that learning history entails a complex interpretation of events that can be strategically and successfully presented to second language English learners.

Acknowledging the shortage of bilingual and ESL-certified teachers, and the continuous and important flow of immigrant children into our public school classrooms, we present the approaches of several elementary student teachers in a Texas bilingual-certification program (grades K–4) that may be adopted by all social studies teachers. Since the spring of 2005, we have focused on promoting the use of historical thinking in elementary classrooms in which a significant number of ELL students are enrolled.

We introduced student teachers who participated in the study to the notion of

historical thinking (Seixas 1993; VanSledright 2002). We taught them how to use primary sources, predominately photographs (Barton 2001), and document-based questions in social studies lessons. Additionally, the student teachers reviewed relevant second language acquisition strategies such as Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach, (CALLA) and Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, (SIOP). To better understand the student teachers' successes with the use of historical thinking, researchers videotaped their lessons, gathered artifacts that teachers and students had made, and conducted interviews with participants who had completed the program.

We argue that despite the variable of language proficiency of young, immigrant children and educational programs designed for their language development (for example, ESL, Transitional Bilingual, Dual Language Bilingual, Sheltered Content Instruction) the strategy of historical thinking can help immigrant children acquire English, social studies content, and the skills necessary for participatory citizenry. To illustrate our claims, we use several examples from elementary social studies classrooms, and review the basic tenets of historical inquiry and language acquisition. First, we describe how tapping into ELL student's prior knowledge can effectively develop the notion of historical positionality. Second, we discuss how to create a classroom context that will shift students' thoughts about history and promote the development of their metacognitive skills. Finally, we conclude by emphasizing how content and language objectives can provide ELL students with access to historical thinking.

What Do Second Language Learners Know about History?

Immigrant children's knowledge of history is based on a worldview that extends beyond classroom practices. In this section, we discuss historical positionality and its relation to students' prior knowledge. We describe how personal experiences influence students'

interpretations of historical evidence and suggest ways for teachers to use children's literature, prevocabulary activities, and historical photographs to build such experiences.

Historical positionality refers to the way in which worldviews and personal experiences can shape students' perspectives and interpretation of historical evidence (VanSledright 2002). It assumes that in any context larger societal values and discourses will directly impact the positions available to students (Thompson Maher and Tetreault 1993; 1994; 2001). For example, Epstein's work on African American and European American high school students turns educators' attention to racial diversity in the teaching and understanding of U.S. history. She explains that students' thoughts about history are "shaped by their own experiences with racial and ethnic privilege and subordination . . . [consequently] young people's perspectives on national history influence their ideas about the meaning of concepts like democracy or equality in historical contexts" (2000, 186). In addition, Willis (2001) argues that socially constructed historical interpretations shape historical thinking and the positionality of learners.

Although Epstein (2000) and Willis (2001) argue that historical ideas and interpretations connect intricately to students' prior knowledge and experience with race and ethnicity, the immigrant and language status of ELL students might also influence their ability to read. In this article we focus on ELL student knowledge, particularly the methods that teachers can employ to build on existing knowledge bases (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short 2000). In determining the prior knowledge of ELL students, teachers might attend to familial or communal funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005). They might also consider prior academic experiences that the student has had with the subject. Consequently, we based our introductory discussion of *Día de los Muertos* on both students experience within their own families and communities, and their educational background in Mexico and the United States. We had access to a wealth of

prior knowledge that our student teachers could use to design classroom activities.

The bilingual student teachers used three strategies to help their students explore historical positionality and access relevant prior knowledge: (1) they used multicultural children's literature, (2) they planned key content vocabulary activities, and (3) they made visual materials (photographs) available. These approaches, although common in elementary school classrooms, are especially important for second language learners.

Using Multicultural Children's Literature

The student teachers began their lessons with multicultural children's literature. They wanted to grab students' attention, provide them with a common classroom experience, set a context for linking the past with the present, fill gaps, examine how individuals make decisions, and promote multiple perspectives (Levstik 1989). Using *Cuadros de mi Familia/Family Pictures* (Garza 1990), one of the student teachers conducted a picture walk in a fourth-grade bilingual classroom. As students viewed Garza's thirteen paintings, they made comments and asked questions regarding her memories of growing up in Kingsville, Texas, near the Mexican border. The students noted her pride in her Mexican American heritage. The traditions depicted in the text were both similar and dissimilar to those practiced in students' homes. After reading the author's narrative of each picture, the students began to discuss the ways that the children had immigrated to the United States and the importance of this immigration in developing the nation. The story provided access to students' prior personal and academic knowledge of family tradition and immigration, and set the foundation for building an understanding of complex historical and social studies concepts.

By analyzing student teachers' lessons, we identified multicultural children's books that were particularly effective in drawing out students' prior

knowledge. *Pablo Remembers: The Fiesta of the Day of the Dead* (Ancona 1993), for example, shows how personal agency affects history. To explore the interaction among different cultural groups in an economic system, a teacher might use *Mama and Papa Have a Store* (Carling 1998). For teachers who wish to depict members of a cultural group as powerful, we suggest *Harvesting Hope: The Story of César Chávez* (Krull 2003). For the teaching of grassroots social movements, *¡Sí, Se Puede! (Yes, We Can!): Janitor Strike in L. A.* (Cohn 2002) presents an excellent example. Finally, for examining historical change, *Gathering the Sun* (Ada 1997) describes the transformation of Mexican culture. Each piece of literature provides rich opportunities for teachers to explore ELL students' prior knowledge and introduce historical thinking.

Planning Key Content Vocabulary Activities

Teaching and discussing multicultural children's literature provided the student teachers with opportunities to contextualize key vocabulary (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short 2000). For example, a second-grade student teacher before, during, and after reading *Amelia's Road* (Altman 1993) posted words related to the experience of migrant farm workers' experiences on a wall. These words were recorded in both Spanish and English. Examples included *campesino* (farmer), *migrante* (migrant), *protesta* (protest), and *manifestar* (march). The word wall recorded common understandings. To arrive at such common understandings, the student teachers planned to clarify ambiguities and contradictions. For example, the right to march and protest embedded in the U.S. First Amendment may have dire consequences for citizens of other nations. Children need to sort these contrasting implications. Introducing, eliciting, and discussing content vocabulary with ELLs provided a strong foundation for small group and independent reading and writing assignments on historical concepts and groups such as the United Farm Workers Union.

Making Visual Materials (Photographs) Available

After using children's literature and vocabulary-building exercises to introduce historical topics, the student teachers introduced visual materials that served as primary sources. They presented ELL students with photographs of Tejanos, archeological digs, indigenous people, and assembly lines. They asked students to describe what they saw and why the photographs (events or figures) were important to the history of the United States. Barton (2001) explains that photographs provide young learners with access to a wide range of historical information. He argues that elementary students can use photographs to make comparisons, sequence events, identify cause and effect, and pose historical questions.

In teaching a fourth-grade lesson on the Alamo, a student teacher introduced photographs of David Crockett, James Bowie, and the Mexican President Antonio López Santa Anna. Students then recounted the narrative most commonly associated with the battle. However, when the student teacher next introduced photographs of Tejano defenders José Toribio Losoya and Gregorio Esparza, the students' became perplexed. As the teacher explained that Mexicanos also fought in the Alamo, ELL students' excitement grew. They realized that others—similar to themselves—had participated on both sides of the conflict. The use of pictures (or, more generally, realia, multimedia, and other learning aids) to help students make sense of auditory information helped disrupt the historical narrative that students had come to accept regarding the Alamo (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short 2000). More important, students also saw themselves in the photographs. No longer were they either absent or associated primarily with a murderous Mexican president—a fact later contested by the student teacher—now they were associated with heroes.

The bilingual student teachers in the study were careful to select topics and photographs that were related to their students' experiences with language,

race, immigration, gender, class, and location. Historical positionality demands that students name multiple positions (e.g., not only associated with Santa Anna, but now also with Losoya and Esparza) and puts them in relation to each other (are we villains or heroes or much more?). These positions "lead to more sophisticated forms of interaction and community" (Thompson Maher and Tetreault 1993), especially when teachers view students' prior knowledge as the basis for guiding the development of historical thinking. Thus, in this project, the use of multicultural children's literature, the careful planning of key vocabulary activities, and the selection of appropriate photographs were instrumental in tapping into what ELL students know about history. These activities enriched the potential of historical inquiry.

How Do Second Language Learners Know What They Know?

Recent debates on teaching history have centered on *what* history students should learn. In contrast, historical thinking attends to *how* students learn. In this section, we discuss two aspects of historical thinking, epistemological stance and metacognition, and examine ways for teachers to facilitate them by using graphic organizers and document-based questions.

Historical thinking asks students to examine primary sources by sifting, questioning, comparing, evaluating, and constructing their own interpretations of historical events and issues. As VanSledright explains, "understanding how you know what you know and come to know it . . ." (2002, 74) is important when learning to read history. Unfortunately, many students are exposed only to the version of history recounted by state-adopted textbooks. They only have access to the historical interpretations of others. By providing contrasting perspectives and evidentiary trails of primary sources, teachers can help students see that history is not merely a set of truths, but has many possible interpretations. Historical thinking departs from traditional methods of

teaching and learning, because it engages students in the analysis of primary sources and asks them to search for corroboration, interpretation, judgment, and their own historical conclusions (VanSledright).

The bilingual student teachers involved in this project made shifting their students' epistemological stance a vital goal of their teaching. This shift is

about their conclusions. For example, after presenting a historical and contemporary photo of assembly line workers in the United States, one teacher used a Venn diagram to record her students' understanding of the differences and similarities between the two periods of time. Listing the ELL students' ideas on the chalkboard, the teachers included on the left side those features unique to the

based questions (DBQs) provided a way to encourage an epistemological and metacognitive approach to historical understanding. By asking questions about significance, agency, empathy, judgments, and historical truth, teachers were able to yield poignant discussions about history, and provide students with the framework necessary to position themselves within a historical context (Seixas 1994). In addition, the use of varying, challenging, and carefully planned DBQs enabled students to know, comprehend, apply, synthesize, analyze, and evaluate history. When reading *Tomás and the Library Lady* (Mora 1997), for example, and discussing the photographs and contributions of Mexican-American leaders such as Dolores Huerta and César Chávez, a student teacher asked questions such as, What were these leaders protesting? Why were they protesting? What changes did they hope to make? And how did they help farm-worker families? The teacher aimed each question at helping students understand the importance of the farm worker movement (significance), the ways in which farm workers participated in democratic processes (agency), what societal changes were targeted by the movement (judgment), and how we might feel as farm workers under such difficult working and living conditions (empathy). As the DBQs become more complex they provide a roadmap for students who are developing complex concepts.

We contend that to discover how second language learners know what they know about history, one should engage in an authentic and transparent pursuit of evidence and reasoning. As students learn to organize their thinking by engaging in a variety of visual representations and salient DBQs, historical interpretation and reasoning become more critical and exciting for young learners.

Social Studies Is a Language-Rich Context for Second Language Learners

Though the social studies rely extensively on the use of literacy skills, strate-

Thinking historically can help illuminate complex concepts for ESL students.

closely related to the development of students' metacognitive skills. As ELL students become more cognizant of their own learning strategies and begin to ask both what they know and how they know it, they gain autonomy in their pursuit of historical questions. Similar to historical detectives, students decide how and what evidence (primary sources) to dig up, judge the value and reliability of this evidence, develop a coherent explanation of what happened, and present and justify their own conclusions (VanSledright 2002). By thinking about their thinking, ELL students make decisions about the pieces of evidence that will best help them determine what has transpired in the past.

To complete this project, bilingual student teachers have encouraged epistemological shifts and the development of metacognitive skills. These strategies included the use of graphic organizers and document-based questions. Although these instructional strategies are common to the social studies, they provide strong scaffolds and are especially important for the development of language and content area skills.

Using Graphic Organizers

Initially, the student teachers used graphic organizers to help students make sense of questions and organize ideas

about their conclusions. For example, after presenting a historical and contemporary photo of assembly line workers in the United States, one teacher used a Venn diagram to record her students' understanding of the differences and similarities between the two periods of time. Listing the ELL students' ideas on the chalkboard, the teachers included on the left side those features unique to the nineteenth-century factory photo, on the right side those unique to the twenty-first-century photo, and in the overlapping area those that were common to both. Although students saw working conditions as vastly contrasting (crowded, dark, and hot versus spacious, well-lit, and air conditioned), they also found that parts of the process overlapped (machines, position of workers in an assembly line, and finished products). The visual organization of the discussion was instrumental in helping students to analyze the historical development of the assembly line.

As a graphic organizer, the Venn diagram helped develop student's conceptual understanding of the historical development of American industry. The diagram was dynamic rather than static. Students added and modified their interpretations as they acquired new information. Other classrooms used different graphic organizers such as KWL charts, spider maps, events chains, and network trees. These helped ELL students understand connections among historical events and concepts.

Presenting Document-Based Questions

Teachers found it effective to pair graphic organizers with questions about primary sources. The use of document-

gic sheltered instruction supports the content and language development of immigrant children and ensures their success (Chamot and O'Malley 1994; Echevarria, Vogt, and Short 2000). Sheltered instruction should not only teach academic content, vocabulary, concepts, and skills, but also use the language and context of the classroom in ways that make information comprehensible to ELL students. Teacher planning, therefore, needs to include language objectives that include checking for key vocabulary, brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, editing, and completing texts.

In a unit on the role of women in social movements, a teacher used pertinent photos as primary sources and included the children's book, *¡Si Se Puede! (Yes We Can!)* (Cohn 2002), a bilingual story set against the backdrop of the successful Justice for Janitors' strike in Los Angeles in 2000. In this story, Carlitos' mother is a union organizer. She is also mother during the day, and janitor of an office building at night. The teacher's content objective required that the learner be able to (1) identify the role of unions in protecting worker rights and (2) examine the role of Dolores Sánchez in the Justice for Janitors Campaign. The teacher's language objective required that students understand and use key vocabulary in a sentence—janitor, strike, rallies, union, wages, and pay raise. When the classroom teacher checked for meaning (e.g., "Who in the story wanted pay raises?"), she noticed that the students in her social studies class were unfamiliar with the word janitor. In their school the people who cleaned the classrooms after school were known as custodians. Because this was a key vocabulary word the students found it important to learn that these two nouns had the same meaning. During the same activity, the English term *rallies* also proved confusing to students. Its Spanish translation, *mítines*, was equally perplexing. When the students looked up this word in their

dictionary, they learned that *mítines*, or rallies, referred specifically to political meetings. This distinction was necessary for students to understand the role of the janitors' union in protecting workers' rights. Without attending to the language objectives, content objectives cannot be fully achieved.

Conclusion

The bilingual student teachers involved in this project improved historical thinking opportunities for ELL students by preparing lessons that attended to what students know and how they know it. Teachers also achieved both content and language objectives. Second language learners bring a collection of valuable experiences to the social studies classroom. Teachers can use a variety of strategies to build historical positionality and epistemology. In this article, we provided examples of the ways in which bilingual student teachers have used multicultural children's literature, academic vocabulary, historical and contemporary photographs, graphic organizers, document-based questions, and clearly stated content and language objectives to enhance their lesson plans. When there are ELL students in a class, focusing on historical thinking provides an ideal way to build on students' prior knowledge and experiences and facilitates the growth of metacognitive skills. The interactions between students and teachers, and the use of particular instructional strategies, are key methods of moving ELLs toward a level of historical thinking that will have measurable impact on student progress in the social studies.

Key words: English language learners, historical thinking, history, multicultural children's literature

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